



Libraries Provide More Bang for the Buck

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, November 15, 2010

As city revenues have continued to decline, more money has been allocated to public safety both in real dollars and as a percentage of the general fund budget. Sixty percent of our general fund is allocated to public safety versus 40 percent 20 years ago. That 60 percent includes public safety pension costs and consumes our top four revenue sources combined: property tax, sales tax, utility tax and phone tax revenues.

In real dollars, San Jose spends \$115 million more on public safety than we did 10 years ago, yet we have less personnel—while our population has grown from 950,000 to one million. One could contrast this at the federal level where our military budget (public safety) is dwarfed by entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and the interest on the national debt. As this spending allocation has transpired in San Jose it is a struggle to pay for other services in our City Charter, such as libraries.

San Jose libraries have been delivering more with less for years. They have been doing so by restructuring how they deliver their services. If the libraries had not changed then residents would have fewer library services today. Our library system has used technology to become more efficient. Ninety five percent of library users use self-checkout. This has been a huge savings on the number of people needed to run a library, plus it has created a more efficient use of the library consumer's time. I remember having to wait in massive lines at the library back in the day when checking out.

Several libraries have automated book sorting equipment where your item is scanned, sorted and transported down a conveyor belt so items get back on the shelf faster and with fewer people. The libraries have implemented technology to augment their service to residents. The same way I believe photo radar or red light running cameras could augment pedestrian safety by issuing tickets 24/7.

Back in 1995 our library system loaned out 4,816,242 items with 288 full-time staff. In fiscal year 2009-2010 our library loaned out nearly 15 million items with 365 full-time staff. Triple the usage—plus new branch libraries—but we did not triple the employees. Was this the equivalent goal of outsourcing by using technology?

We see the value in libraries not only from testimonials at council meetings but also by the numbers. Last year 14,919,873 items were borrowed from

the library and 7,642,747 visitors walked into our libraries (not unique visitors and not all San Jose residents). Six of our libraries loaned more than one million items during the year. Berryessa, Evergreen and Tully loaned out over 100,000 items a month. The most visited library in 2009-2010 fiscal year is Tully with 530,320 visitors and the least visited library was Almaden with 107,878 visitors.

The library is looking to stay ahead of obsolescence by offering technology like free WiFi at all branches, text-a-librarian service, eBooks with over 109,000 downloads, online magazine and newspaper subscriptions as well as subscriptions to 60 different research resources. Ninety eight percent of new library card registrations and 62 percent of overdue fine payments are done online.

The Partners in Reading program, which provides literacy classes to adults, has been a catalyst for volunteers. More than 25,498 hours were contributed by volunteers which equates to \$593,000 in cost avoidance. Fifty eight percent of this program is funded by the general fund with the remaining coming from grants.

The Library Parcel Tax was first approved in 1994 and renewed by over two-thirds of voters in 2004. That tax provided \$7.2 million to the libraries this year which funded 47 percent of the materials budget and 41 full time library staff. The Library Parcel Tax is \$27.80 for a single family home and displayed on your property tax bill. This parcel tax will expire in 2014 and would likely go back to the voters for their consideration in either June 2012 or November 2012.

Should San Jose voters going forward select any new taxes go to specific city departments? We have set up rules at the state level, for example, with Prop 98 and education funding. Measure R in Palo Alto for example would have required a citywide election if a fire station was to be closed or a reduction in fire staffing but it was rejected, with 75 percent voting no.

The deficit going into next year is approximately \$70 million. This means anything cut last year is not being restored and more cuts will have to be made. Residents will lose services unless we deliver services differently asap. The Council will meet all day on Nov. 18 to discuss the deficit in public session.

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